

HANS URS VON BALTHASAR SOCIETY

Topic: Neither “Kid Nation” nor “A World Without Children”:
Balthasar’s Theology of Youthfulness in Relation to
Romanticism and Contemporary Culture.

Convener/

Moderator: Barbara Sain, University of St. Thomas

Presenters: Christopher Denny, St. John’s University, Queens, New York
Connie Lasher, John Paul II Institute for Theology and
Environmental Studies

Respondent: Christophe Potworowski, McGill University

In keeping with the convention theme “Generations,” the Hans Urs von Balthasar Society chose to focus on the theme of youthfulness in Balthasar’s theology. The first presentation was given by Christopher Denny and entitled “Which Holy Child? German Romantic Rivals to Balthasar’s Theology of Youth.” According to Denny, Balthasar’s last complete book, his 1988 *Unless You Become Like This Child*, is more than a meditation on childhood. This work is the summation of Balthasar’s entire theological anthropology. The text begins with two mysterious epigrams from the German Romantic poets Novalis and Friedrich Hölderlin. Denny argued that these mysterious epigrams are coded attacks by Balthasar upon an entire view of childhood that radiates from German idealism, an idealism that protests against the negative evaluation of childhood as mere pre-adulthood. Novalis and Hölderlin, like Balthasar, reject the condescending view of childhood that modernity offers, and Balthasar appreciates the value that both writers place upon children and young people. In the end, however, because neither philosopher-poet ever broke completely free of the thrall of an absolute idealism and its individualist conception of selfhood, Novalis and Hölderlin proffered a view of childhood that bears only superficial resemblance to that of the gospels.

Connie Lasher then presented her paper, “‘Gardening at Night’: Recovering von Balthasar’s Theme of Youthfulness ‘for and in a New Generation’.” The presentation began with a very brief overview of Balthasar’s own context for doing theology (20th century Catholic renewal/*ressourcement*), considering his dialogue with many mentors who shaped his own thought, and development of his critique of modernity’s “monological” turn to the subject, along with German Idealist/Romantic identity-oriented reactions. The paper then presented a brief exposition of Balthasar’s fundamental methodological orientation (his appropriation of the analogy of Being as Being is concretely experienced by the subject), in which “forgetfulness of Being and of God” is countered by a metaphysical analysis (“the fourfold distinction”) in which the child awakening to self-consciousness in the mother’s arms becomes the locus classicus of his theology of youthfulness. Here, the horizon of Being opens to the child in the experience of having been permitted entry (to be), and this fundamental experience of love is judged to contain an original “disclosure of God.” Thus, childhood and the

concrete experience of origins becomes a permanent touchstone for Christian maturity, a touchstone whose “sphere of original wholeness and health” finds its source in the eternal Child Jesus, and his disclosure of the Triune life of God’s love as the origin and permanent meaning of Being and the mystery of finitude. The paper concluded with a brief exploration of Balthasar’s call for a “renewal of a metaphysics of human wholeness” as this applies to the contemporary cultural context, with particular emphasis upon the question of education/formation of youth in a postmodern situation which threatens the human quest for meaning. Balthasar’s emphasis upon fostering the child’s original sense of wonder and receptivity to beauty was proffered as crucial, necessary Christian counter-witness in defiance of a “world without children.”

In his response, Christophe Potworowski noted that in discussions about the privileged position of the child, there often could be an undue emphasis on the cognitive aspects of wonder. Despite a place for gratitude, in that I did not give myself existence, there is often little room for a reference to an authority, and therefore no sense of mission. The temptation is to go for wonder by itself, without mission, thereby ending up with a stultified anthropology, one that is not fully and intensely engaged with reality. The more fruitful alternative is to follow an other, and thereby being pulled beyond one’s own measure of things. A reading of Balthasar’s work on the importance of the child in light of his other writings on mission, and in light of Adrienne Von Speyr’s writings on simplicity and the Marian position of virginal motherhood, yields a fuller anthropology where fruitfulness is dependent on being generated. Finally, the method and context for the development of such an anthropology is provided by belonging in the Church and the concrete ecclesial relations of friendship.

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